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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, NEA
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [MV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Political Islam in Sri Lanka and the Maldives

Ref: State 205815

(U) Classified by Donald A. Camp, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) In response to Reftel action request, country descriptions of political Islam as a factor in Sri Lanka and the Maldives are contained in Paras 2-7.

SRI LANKA

2. (C) OVERVIEW: Political Islam is not an important factor in Sri Lanka at this time. Sri Lanka is a majority Buddhist country with a large Hindu presence, and, of Sri Lanka's roughly 20 million people, only about 7 percent are Muslim (the vast majority Sunni). While some Muslims are affluent and there is a large population of Muslims in the eastern region, the community as a whole is essentially a marginal player in Sri Lanka in terms of the country's politics, culture, and economy. The key caveat to the moderate picture the Muslim community presents involves Sri Lanka's ongoing peace process. In a dynamic that is already in its early stages, eastern Muslims could become radicalized in an Islamist direction if they perceive that a possible negotiated settlement to the conflict would leave the Tamil Tigers in control of their home region.

3. (C) DISCUSSION: The majority of Muslims support the various factions of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which holds 15 seats in the 225-seat Parliament. Founded as a product of a local Muslim "identity" movement that began after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the SLMC is a communal party, but is basically secular, steering away from a discourse focused on religious precepts such as shari'ah. The party also supports modern social norms, such as equality for women. With respect to foreign policy, the party has generally not/not supported U.S. policy in the Middle East, including in regard to the Israeli/Palestinian dispute and Iraq. That said, the main faction of the SLMC, which is led by Minister of Ports Raul Hakeem (a close Mission contact), is a member of the United National Front (UNF) governing coalition and has not protested the GSL's largely pro-U.S. policies. In early 2003, the SLMC was buffeted by disagreements over how to approach Sri Lanka's peace process, cementing political fractures in the party. At this point, there are three major SLMC factions: SLMC (Hakeem); SLMC (Athaullah); and the National Unity Alliance (NUA). (Note: The leader of the NUA is Ferial Ashraff, another close Mission contact, who is the widow of the founder of the SLMC, M.H.M. Ashraff, who died in 2000.) While they disagree on peace track issues, none of the factions is Islamist-leaning at this time. Other than the SLMC, many Muslims -- especially those in Colombo -- are supporters of the country's dominant political parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the People's Alliance (PA). Both the UNP and the PA are dominated by Sinhalese Buddhists.

4. (C) Against this backdrop of routine participation by Muslims in the democratic process, there is very little evidence of political Islam in Sri Lanka. During the military campaigns against the al-Qaida/Taliban in Afghanistan in late 2001 and more recently against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, there were some anti-U.S. demonstrations in which Muslims played a role. One party active in these demonstrations was the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), which has no parliamentary representation and has very few members. In general, the various factions of the SLMC did not participate in these demonstrations, though there was a slight undercurrent of anti-U.S. feeling among mainstream Muslims.

5. (C) The very limited Islamist feeling that there is in Sri Lanka flows from the Muslim community's fear of the terrorist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization and not from the anti-U.S., anti-Israel motif prevalent in the Middle East. This perspective is

particularly widespread in the eastern region where Muslims, who form somewhere over 25 percent of the regional population, are deeply anxious that any negotiated settlement to the conflict not leave the Tamil Tigers in control of the east. There is some information that some disaffected Muslims in the east have formed small anti-Tamil Tiger armed groups with names like "Osama" and "Jihad." Such groups are not a major factor in the east at this time. Nonetheless, fueled reportedly by money from "charitable foundations" based in the Middle East and remittances from Muslims working in that region, there has been an overall shift in the east toward an Islam with a harder edge. (Note: Across the wide spectrum of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, there is also some indication that more women are honoring hijab norms by covering their hair, etc., than was the case in the past. This could be an indication of a push for prevalence of stricter forms of Islam within the community.) Anecdotal, Mission has heard that some anti-western views may be gaining a limited beachhead in the east where there was none before. The Sri Lankan government is well aware of the potential problem with Muslims in the east and keeps a close watch over the situation.

MALDIVES

16. (C) OVERVIEW AND DISCUSSION: Political Islam is not an important factor in the Maldives at this time. Of the Maldives' roughly 300,000 people, virtually all are Sunni Muslim, which is the state religion. Islam in the Maldives is strictly controlled by the government, which enforces a moderate form of the faith. Women's rights to full participation in society, for example, are protected by the government. With respect to foreign policy, the Maldivian government generally assumes a low profile, looking toward the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and India, its influential neighbor to the north, for its cues on major issues. The government, which is led by President Gayoom, who considers himself a reformer in the Ataturk mold, is basically quite friendly to the U.S., strongly supporting the international campaign against terrorism, for example.

17. (C) Despite this generally positive picture, there are concerns that some trace elements of Islamic extremism may be emerging in the Maldives. The government is concerned that some Maldivians returning from studies in the Middle East may have imbibed radical beliefs, and several reported Islamist-leaning Maldivians were convicted of subversion in 2002. (Note: One Maldivian national, who was captured in Pakistan, is detained in Guantanamo.) Although the country has relatively strong economic indices, there are worries that unemployment and underemployment may create a fertile ground for radicals. Moreover, the government's autocratic style may also help spark dissent. All that said, there is no evidence that any Islamist organizations have taken root in the Maldives at this time.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

CAMP